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AUTHOR Kiefer, Kathleen E.
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ABSTRACT

College basic writing teachers involved in student/teacher conferences should be aware of the negative effects that result from premature reassurance, assuring students of success too quickly and/or beyond reasonable expectations. The attitudes of basic writers can be divided into three general categories: (1) those who have always had trouble in composition courses and expect to continue to have trouble writing, (2) those who have few mechanical problems but are reluctant to write because they are convinced they have nothing worthwhile to say, and (3) those who think they can write better than anyone gives them credit for. Prematurely reassuring the first category of writers can lead them to misinterpret a conditional, qualified teacher-made statement as a guarantee of success; e.g., if they focus on a single idea they will get a good grade. Writers in the second category can become complacent when told too soon they have almost achieved their goal of cleaning up mechanical errors and often quit before they have developed writing fluency. The third category of writers often displays a dramatic shift from defiance to devastation when confronted with an honest assessment of their writing errors, often for the first time, and can elicit from the sympathetic teacher a false assurance that the basic writing course is just what they need and all they need. Basic writers are generally more insecure about their writing than average college freshmen and their teachers should cautiously use reassurance as a motivational technique. (AEA)

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Premature Reassurance and the Basic Writer

Kathleen E. Kiefer

Anyone who has spoken to a troubled person--student, friend, colleague--knows that the first commonsensical thing to do is to reassure the person that the problem is not insoluble, that the anxieties are amenable to calming. In psychiatric and counseling sessions, such reassurance is the backbone of progress. The troubled individual must begin to see the problem in some kind of hopeful perspective, and the counselor provides that perspective through reassurance. As Drs. English and Finch note in their Introduction to Psychiatry, reassurance is the primary and most common treatment any counselor uses.1

But there is a fine line of distinction between reassurance that will have positive effects on the individual and premature reassurance, that kind of blanket statement that everything will be OK. The dangers of overly reassuring someone looking for comfort have been clearly recognized by psychiatrists and counselors, so clearly that little information is actually printed about premature reassurance, and little work has been done on the effects of premature reassurance in clinical settings. But in my experience with basic writers I have seen with marvelously clear hindsight that premature reassurance can undo more progress in composition skills than almost anything else I have encountered.

I am not suggesting that basic writers are deeply troubled individuals. I am suggesting that some of them are profoundly insecure writers and that the insecurity makes them vulnerable to drastic swings in motivation and confidence.

Let me retrace some steps in what I see as the development of basic

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writing programs and attitudes before I speak directly about premature reassurance. When "remedial" programs first appeared in major universities across the country, the perception of Mina Shaughnessy best accounted for their genesis. The "new" students were culturally or educationally disadvantaged and thus handicapped in their writing. They were suddenly appearing on the steps of the university claiming their rights to an equal education guaranteed by more liberal or even open admissions policies. With these students came distinct writing problems--problems arising from dialect interference or problems arising from the primary and secondary (if any) school experience. These students had often been told that they couldn't write and so they believed that they could never learn the skill. In fact, many of them looked upon it an an alien art completely beyond their ken. As Mina Shaughnessy showed us in Errors and Expectations, the struggle was long and exhausting, but many of the students she saw and worked with achieved fluency in composition.

In many respects, basic writing programs begun in the last five years have recognized this audience-- disadvantaged students--but have also geared their programs toward another, wider audience also disadvantaged in writing-- poorly-prepared students, black, white, or Chicano, lower-, middle-, or upper-class. What we see in the remedial programs now is that our students come from every kind and quality of high school with every imaginable background. These students present a new challenge in dialogue with basic writing instructors.

My experience is in two basic writing programs. The first--at Ohio State University--involved open enrollment at the university. Almost anyone would be granted admission to the university. Our problem in the Writing Workshop was to keep them in the university. We certainly saw

students of the sort discussed in Errors and Expectations, often black students from inner city schools. But we also saw students from each high school in the state, a total of 25% of the incoming freshman class in 1977-78. My latest experience comes from directing the basic writing program at Colorado State University. Twenty percent of the incoming freshmen participate in the basic writing program because their skills are inadequate for the freshman composition program. These students again represent almost every high school in the state, but Colorado has sharper distinctions between urban and rural schools, and between white and chicano populations. We have very few black students at CSU: most of them either go through the remedial program or a TEFL program, but we do have chicano students with dialect interference problems, as well as poorly-prepared white students from rural and urban schools.

Distinctions according to school and school district, according to racial and ethnic background, mean less now than in the past. We expect in our basic writing program to see simply poorly-prepared, unpracticed writers who may or may not have had a formal composition course in high school. Attitudes among basic writers are now more critical in our responses to our basic writing students.

I have divided basic writers into three general categories for the purposes of assessing our advice upon their motivation and writing improvement. The first group includes traditional basic writers--the "downtrodden." These students have always had trouble in composition courses and expect to continue to have trouble writing. For them, writing has not only never been easy, it has never been less than a monumental task. Many of these students are so inured to red corrections that they

completely ignore errors. We have all heard, "I've never been able to spell," with a slight wail on never. The downtrodden have never seen any benefit in composition courses; in fact, writing courses pose the greatest threat to their continuation in the educational system. They are convinced that they will never be able to write, and no matter what a comp teacher tells them, they will remain unable to write.

The second group of basic writers really aren't basic writers in the sense of the downtrodden. The students in the second group have few mechanical problems but are nonetheless reluctant to write much. They are convinced that they have little, if anything, worthwhile putting on paper. These students can write fairly well, but thinly, but they do not perform well under pressure. Or they refuse to take a placement exam because they know they will be placed into the remedial program. Sometimes they take a basic composition course as an elective; for the most part they sit quietly in the classroom, learning certainly, and benefitting from the practice of writing skills, but taking time away from those students who need individual attention. These students are the "insecures."

The final major group of basic writers is the "misplaced." Just as the downtrodden are convinced that they will never write, the misplaced are convinced that they can write better than anyone they know. They have been cheated by the system into additional requirements. They must pay extra money, waste time, and fall behind in their rigorous schedules simply because some lousy test doesn't show their creative and analytic writing skills. Uniformly, these students have gotten A's in all their English classes. And some will even bring folders of their work as proof that they can write well. For them, self-confidence is no problem--at least before the conference with the director of placement or of the basic writing program.

While the downtrodden are the hardest to motivate, because they are the hardest to convince that this course will do for them what no other attempt at language training has done, they are also the hardest to reassure in any way. They are aware of the significance and depth of their problems with written communication, and thus they generally take the teacher's reassurance as no more than a motivational pep talk. The hidden danger in counselling the downtrodden is the most subtle form of premature reassurance. As we can all testify, basic writers do not necessarily listen very carefully. Even if the teacher stresses repeatedly the conditional nature of success--if you focus on a single idea, if you clearly develop the main idea with specific details, if you correct your sentence problems--the downtrodden student may just misinterpret a conditional, qualified statement as a guarantee of success, or, in terms of premature reassurance, an unequivocal assurance that everything will work out well. My most notable experience with this phenomenon occurred some two years ago at Ohio State. A student charged into my office and shouted that I had lied. He gave me no time to reply before he pulled out a paper I had just returned and pointed to my end comment. In it I wrote that although his topic sentence was satisfactory, the development of his idea was not specific, not complete. He jabbed at the word "satisfactory" until I was sure he would destroy the piece of paper. And all the while he asked me over and over, "How could I say it was satisfactory and then give him a "U" (unsatisfactory) for the paragraph?" A simple bit of praise resulted in a half-hour harangue which left him angry and me shaken. I realized that I had stressd topic sentences so much in class and in comments on earlier papers that I had led him to believe that a good

topic sentence meant a good paragraph. Of course, I knew that I had also discussed in more than adequate detail the necessity and importance of other paragraph features. But to that student who had been working so doggedly to get just one thing right since it seemed to him to be of preeminent importance, I had lied and cheated him out of his success. I had offered an escape from downtroddenness simply to step on him when he raised his head.

This example is undoubtedly an extreme one, but it does show that we as teachers come to the composition course with expectations very different from our students'. We expect that mixing praise with blame will soften the blame, and in most cases it does just that. But for students who mishear or misread the conditions of success, who see only a part of the sentence, "You will have a fine paragraph if . . . ," we can betray a trust that we try to use to our advantage with downtrodden students. We destroy what motivational advantage we might have had, but we destroy it through no real fault of our own.

The "insecures" present a minimal counselling challenge. Like the downtrodden they need reassurance that they can learn the skill, that they have something to say, that they can communicte effectively with a reader. The danger with the insecures is very similar to that with the downtrodden. If the instructor does not pointedly underline the conditions of suceess and if the instructor praises too highly too quickly, complacency can set in. Now truly insecure writers take quite some convincing, but I have seen budding writers simply stop trying because they have been told too soon that they have achieved or almost achieved their goals. A student in the basic writing program last fall was depressed about her

performance in the course. Ann admitted that she could see the progress she had made in the first six weeks of the semester, but she had convinced herself that she could not ultimately succeed. Ann explained to her instructor that she felt compelled to drop the course. Her instructor came to me with Ann's papers, and we agreed that if Ann continued to make such progress she would be fully prepared for the freshman composition course. Ann then met with her instuctor, who combined my conditional reassurance with her own. Ann knew that specific development of ideas was still her main objective, but she just quit working. Instead of being our smashing success in the program, Ann only marginally passed her final paragraphs. When Ann's instructor met with me again at the end of the semester, she announced that she just couldn't understand what had happened. Ann had decided to just sit back and wait for the semester to end. In our desire to see Ann continue in the course and in her progress, we had, in fact, stripped her of the motivation she was most used to--insecurity--and in her new-found complacency Ann almost failed.

That leaves us with only the "misplaced" to consider here. We must distinguish carefully between students who sincerely believe that they are misplaced and insecure students putting up a show of bravado to test the system. Insecure students will back down fairly quickly when confronted with writing samples. But misplaced students will maintain unfalteringly that the samples were written on a bad day or that impromptu writing has always bothered them, but that they know rhetorical theory, they know grammar, they know how to write. For these students, the truth can be devastating. They trust their high school teachers who had told them for years that their writing was adequate, even good. And here a

stranger in a new environment challenges that most personal, most egocentric behavior--expressing thought on paper. While the instructor is busily pointing out flaws in logic and expression, in word choice and coherence, in focus and organization, the students test their self-images, buoyed by years of academic success, against this new perception of their logical processes. They may suddenly crumble and acquiesce: yes, the comp specialist is correct in assessment of writing skills. Or the students may remain outwardly defiant, only to lose that spunky self-confidence which would contribute to their presentation as writers. But the real damage is yet to come. The teacher, upon seeing the dramatic effect that his evaluation has had on previously defiant students, may overdo the reassurance necessary to motivate the students. The teacher explains that the basic writing course is just the thing to give these student what they need, all they need, in basic comp skills. The teacher assures students that success is just a course away, when a calmer estimate of the students' difficulties gives lie to such optimism.

One problem with premature reassurance is that we never mean to do it. We only want to make students feel more confident that they can achieve a reasonable goal. But sometimes in our own anxiety to put students at ease we forget that a reasonable goal for us is not necessarily a reasonable goal for college freshmen. But perhaps the most urgent reason for questioning our student/teacher conference habits is that we simply cannot apply the same playing rules for basic writers as for other students. If we accept the definition of the American Psychiatric Association, that adolescence is "a choronological period beginning with the physical and emotional proceses leading to sexual and psychosocial maturity and ending at an ill-defined time when the individual achieves

independence and social productivity,"[2] then we must admit that we are dealing with less than mature and secure adults in college students. And if we further maintain that there is any correlation between language and mental maturity, then we must recognize basic writers as individuals who come to the university with even greater insecurities than average freshmen. Dr. Armand Nicholi sums up the stresses that our freshmen face:

> As the mid-adolescent enters late adolescence he confronts the difficult task of leaving home, of choosing a college or finding a job, and of finding among the billions of people on earth someone with whom to share his life. He must make the difficult shift from responsibility to an outside parent to responsibility for himself--a change that makes failure harder to tolerate.3

When we present adolescents with a basic writing requirement, we force them to accept a failure that separates them from their peers. We must also give them the respect and understanding they deserve by bringing to the basic writing classroom and conference session the knowledge of their special needs and possible reactions to our otherwise acceptable reassurance.

We may never know how much damage we do with premature reassurance. We certainly do not want to experiment with students and actively reassure beyond reasonable expectations. Nor can we shrug off the problem as one that afflicts only the new teacher, the naive teacher, the inexperienced teacher. We can all remember occasions when we waited for a full professor with twenty years of teaching experience and overheard a remark to another student to the effect of "it will all be OK." We can probably all remember hearing words to that effect from our dissertation advisors or committee members or from some other trusted counselor or colleague. We cannot "kiss it and make it better" in composition programs, especially in remedial programs. But it is in remedial programs where administrators expect

NOTES

[1]Spurgeon O. English and Stuart M. Finch, Introduction to Psychiatry, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1957), p. 528.

[2]Armand M. Nicholi, Jr., "The Adolescent," in The Harvard Guide to Modern Psychiatry, ed. Armand M. Nicholi, Jr. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 519.

[3]Nicholi, p. 526.

results of that magnitude. We are guilty of extraordinary betrayal of trust if we ever lead our students, even inadvertently, to similar expectations.

Kate Kiefer
Colorado State University

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